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ABSTRACT

A course entitled "Women and Violence in Literature and the Media" extends the definition of violence to include not only physical and emotional abuse but psychological manipulation and destruction as well. The course has two major objectives: to establish that violence against women does occur in our society and is culturally approved of and perpetuated, and to explore the expression in literature and the media of male violence against women, the ways women respond to that violence, and the conditions under which women become violent. In the first part of the course, several documentaries on the subject of women as victims are shown, including "The Fear That Binds Us," which incorporates personal testimony of women who experienced incest, battering, or rape, and "Why Men Rape," based on interviews with convicted rapists. In the second part of the course, various pieces of literature are assigned, including Norman Mailer's "The Time of Her Life," John Fowles's "The Collector," and Judith Rossner's "Looking for Mr. Goodbar." While the course paints a grim picture, the reality is that it is a violent world and women are particularly vulnerable. However, women do not have to resign themselves to being victims. Individually and collectively, women can not only cope with male violence against them but can reduce and, ultimately, stop it. (A list of films and texts used in the course as well as a selected bibliography of materials on violence against women are appended.) (DF)

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TEACHING ABOUT WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

I teach a course I developed entitled Women and Violence in Literature and the Media as the subject of Women' Studies 300: Topics in Women's Studies (Humanities Emphasis). Extending the definition of "violence" to include not only physical and emotional abuse but psychological manipulation and destruction as well, the course has these objectives: to establish that violence against women occurs with appalling frequency in our society and that such violence is culturally approved of and perpetuated; and to explore the expression in literature and the media of male violence against women, the ways women respond to that violence, and the conditions under which women become violent themselves.

In the first part of the course, students see several documentaries on the subject of women as victims of male violence. The Fear That Binds Us points out that violence includes verbal abuse, sexual abuse, taking liberties, and exploiting another person's rights. Violence also includes the threat of harm and simply knowing that women are potential victims of assault or rape. The film also incorporates personal testimony of five women who experienced incest, battering, or rape. In addition, spokespersons from a variety of backgrounds offer political, social, and economic explanations for why there is so much violence against women and why women often stay in hostile or violent situations. Finally,

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the documentary suggests ways of coping with and avoiding victimization. Another excellent film is Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography, an exploration of the world of peep shows, strip joints, and live sex performances. The film interviews publishers of pornography as well as strippers and other performers. It also interviews such outspoken critics of pornography as Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, Kathleen Barry, and Susan Griffin. A graphic and sometimes disturbing examination of pornography and its effects on women, the film very clearly presents the feminist position on a controversial subject.

Other documentaries that provide background material for the literature part of the course are Why Men Rape, based on interviews with ten convicted rapists; either Rape Culture, a look at the way advertising, movies, and popular music send the message that it is all right to abuse women, or Killing Us Softly: Advertising Images of Women, which deals entirely with advertisements; and a Sneak Previews program in which film critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskell explain the recent increase in violence against women in R-rated movies as a male reaction against the women's movement.

Also relevant is the research of Neal Malamuth and Ed Donnerstein, among others, on the effects of sexual violence in pornography and movies on male sexual arousal, rape-related attitudes, and aggression toward women. Malamuth, for example, has demonstrated that college men who viewed pornography that fused sex and violence tended to be sexually aroused by the idea of rape, and over half the men in his studies report they would rape if assured they would not be caught. Donnerstein's work indicates that

exposure to sexually violent R-rated movies such as Tool Box Murders and Texas Chain Saw Massacre increases callous attitudes toward rape victims and acceptance of behavior portrayed in the films, that is, habituation to sexual violence. Donnerstein contends that if people become hardened to violence from seeing so much of it, they may be less likely to respond to real violence and may have an increased proclivity to commit it themselves.

To underscore the connection between literature and life, we read selections from Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, a work which relies heavily on literary analysis to make its point about the disparate power relationships between men and women and the ways male power frequently translates into abuse of and violence against women. Millett contends that men are socialized to a sex role that encourages aggression and condones violence, a contention also held by Susan Brownmiller. We read the chapters in Against Our Will which explain the way literature, movies, and popular songs glorify men who commit violence against women.

The literature and media part of the course illustrates Millett's and Brownmiller's theories and depicts a variety of types of violence committed by both men and women. For example, Norman Mailer's short story "The Time of Her Time" very clearly illustrates what Millett means by sexual politics and especially male acceptance of Freud's and Deutsch's outrageous theory of female masochism. In that story, Sergius O'Shaughnessy brings Denise Gondelman to her first orgasm by painfully penetrating her anally and then calling her a "dirty little Jew"--an insult that pushes her over the edge to orgasm. In Alfred Hitchcock's Frenzy, the

focus is on the dilemma of the male lead who is mistakenly thought to be a psychopathic murderer, rather than on the female victims who are raped and then strangled with the killer's necktie. The film contains examples of the kind of myths about rape that go largely unexamined, such as the scene early in the film when two respectable-looking men are discussing the murders in a bar. When the barmaid comments that the victims are first raped, one of the men says, "Well, every cloud has a silver lining."

On the other hand, John Fowles' The Collector is a chilling critique of male possessiveness. Operating on limited and distorted information about male-female relationships, Ferdinand Clegg captures and imprisons the spirited, creative Miranda Gray. While Ferdinand's journal reveals his narrow-mindedness and spiritual and intellectual poverty, Miranda's shows depth and complexity of character. She explores such issues as education, class, ignorance, creativity, the use of violence and force, and what constitutes strength and weakness. It becomes clear that Ferdinand's only strength is physical, while Miranda has many strengths: her zest for life, her intellectual curiosity, and her determination to live in the face of the most abject forms of physical and psychological imprisonment. Despite her intelligence and compassion, Miranda is helpless when confronted with Ferdinand's single-minded, obsessive determination to possess her. That she dies with her last words being "I forgive you" and "the sun" increases our admiration for her and adds poignancy to her monstrous situation.

A classic example of what Adrienne Rich calls the real subject of pornography, the crushing of the soul, is Pauline Réage's Story of O. Whether parody or straight-forward pornography, it is representative of the humiliation, degradation, and finally dehumanization of women that is standard fare of such material. Whipped daily, her body carefully made up, the object at any time of a variety of sexual practices with any man who wants her, O is eventually branded on her buttocks with the initials of her lover. She is further identified as his property by an iron ring placed in her labia. Through all this, O is grateful and honored to serve her lover. In the last scene of the book, a nude O is led around at a party by a chain attached to a collar around her neck, her body hair completely shaved off, an owl's head mask over her own, not uttering a word. Clearly Story of O is an extreme manifestation of a variety of violent attitudes toward women, illustrating the feminist position that pornography frequently depicts a destructive and dehumanizing connection of sex with violence.

Just as disturbing a world view is that of Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange, particularly Kubrick's vision of women and violence toward them as well as his assertion that the film is a statement of what it means to be "truly human." The film, like Story of O, constantly links sex with violence. Alex is the heroic bandit, the picaro turned nasty. He steals, batters, and vandalizes. He rapes a woman in front of her helpless husband. He murders a woman by smashing her face with a massive sculpture of a phallus. And Alex has no remorse, no guilt feelings, for any of it. Despite this, ^{insensitivity} Alex is the most sympathetically treated

character in the film. Social, political, and religious institutions are represented in a state of general degeneracy and decadence. Kubrick said of his film that Alex represents man the way he would be if society did not impose civilization upon him. He believes audiences respond to Alex's guiltless liberty to rape and murder--that in Alex, "we" see our natural savage selves. Clearly Kubrick's vision is male; his observations could not possibly apply to women in the context of the film.

Given the social reality of women's lives, it is not surprising that much fiction by women writers explores the issues of female autonomy and female vulnerability in the face of male violence. Many works by women look closely at women's struggles to control their own lives and the impediments in their way. Three such novels are included in this course: Diane Johnson's The Shadow Knows, Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm, and Judith Rossner's Looking for Mr. Goodbar.

The Shadow Knows explores female vulnerability in the face of countless acts of physical, psychological, and emotional violence. N. is attacked in areas all women are vulnerable in: her home, traditionally the haven, is now under seige by anonymous evil forces; her car is temporarily immobilized; her good friend Ev dies; another friend, Bess, turns against her; and her lover returns to his wife. N.'s confrontations with danger, threats, and real violence represent her struggle toward autonomy. In contrast to other books about women who are victims of violence, this novel suggests that acknowledging one's vulnerability is the way to survive. When it turns out that rape, not murder or mayhem, is the

violence N. expects at every turn, she is relieved. Now she can get on with her life, having learned to keep her eyes open. "You learn to find your way in the dark," she says. "Your eyes get used to it."

Like The Shadow Knows, Bodily Harm suggests that women's spiritual growth is possible in spite of male aggression against them, though it does so somewhat hesitantly. Rennie Wilford experiences almost as many physical and emotional assaults as N. Hexam does: she's had a partial mastectomy; her lover has left her; she comes home one afternoon to find the police in her apartment and a coiled rope on her bed, left by an anonymous intruder; and she is embroiled against her will in a revolution on the tiny Caribbean island of St. Antoine where she has fled to escape the violence of Toronto. Wherever she goes, however, violence is unquestionably male, and unlike the malignancy cut from her body, the malignancy of male violence may very well be terminal. Rennie's wish not to become involved ("Massive involvement," she tells her doctor, has "never been my thing."), she becomes deeply involved with the people she meets on St. Antoine. Ambiguously, at the end of the novel she may or may not be on a plane headed for home, she may or may not ever be rescued. Rennie learns an important lesson, however, when she tends the badly beaten Lora, having realized "there's no such thing as a faceless stranger." When she takes Lora's hand, "the hardest thing she's ever done," she involves herself emotionally with another human being. Resigned to the fact that not only is she not exempt

but nobody else is exempt either, she learns to "pay attention."
Like N. Hexam, Rennie Wilford must get used to the dark.

Unlike N. Hexam and Rennie Wilford, Theresa Dunn is swallowed by the dark. More with the murder that ends the novel, Looking for Mr. Goodbar is concerned with the psychological and emotional damage done to Theresa Dunn, a violation of the spirit that renders her incapable of engaging in any but a purely sexual and finally self-destructive relationship with a man. Theresa's relationship with James, who genuinely loves her, is seriously damaged by her self-defensive, flippant attitude about sex combined with her deep-seated lack of self-worth. Her confinement in a body cast for a year as an adolescent is symbolic of the lifelong restrictions on her emotions, and the physical violence done by Gary Cooper White is the inevitable, real manifestation of the violence to her spirit men have committed. Theresa is excited by the frenzied sexuality of Tony but threatened by the love of James. This conflict of emotions produces a rage that leads her ultimately to Mr. Goodbar, where she picks up White and is brutally murdered by him. Her last words are, "Do it, do it, do it" The dark vision of the novel suggests that there is no hope for a woman with so overwhelmingly oppressive a background as Theresa Dunn's, whose struggle for autonomy and self-knowledge places her on a deadly collision course that runs her head-on into her assailant.

Students are asked to compare Theresa Dunn with Hedda Gabler from the play by the same name and with Bree Daniels from the film Klute. All three women are torn by opposing forces and have a surprising number of similarities given the different time periods

and genres in which those characters were created. Students discuss these women's attitudes about sex, marriage, and love; their comments on power or being in control of their own lives; the way conventional morality or socially approved behavior affects them; and their proclivity to commit violence. Both Hedda Gabler and Bree Daniels are emotionally like Theresa Dunn, for whom the conflict between a strong sexual drive and a repressive religion and middle-class background produces her^{almost} schizophrenic behavior. The violence these women commit is linked to their desperate desire for autonomy: Hedda wants "the power to mold a human destiny"; Bree wants to live free from her old life as a prostitute even though turning tricks gave her a strong sense of power; and Theresa wants to control her own destiny. Hedda's boredom with life, her inner emptiness that results from strict adherence to a social convention that keeps her trapped in the drawing room, leads to suicide when it becomes evident that she is in another man's power. Bree lashes out at Klute with a pair of scissors when he tries to keep her from going with her former pimp, and she is probably committing spiritual suicide by leaving New York with Klute at the end of the film. Finally, Theresa, who sees marriage to James as a confinement she could not tolerate, enjoys hostile, aggressive sex and cruises tough neighborhood bars until she finds the man who murders her.

While these women are primarily self-destructive, some women do respond to violence by committing it against others, but only after enduring all kinds of hardships and always as a last resort. Susan Glaspell's Trifles is an excellent example of this behavior

and a superb exploration of female bonding against men in a male-dominated world. Sent to look for evidence that might incriminate Minnie Wright in the strangling death of her husband, the men in the play go about their official business, occasionally making fun of the small details the women occupy themselves with in the kitchen. Unwittingly, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters piece together the probable circumstances of John Wright's death and stumble upon a concrete piece of evidence that would show motive--a canary with its neck wrung. They conclude that, just as he had stifled the young Minnie Foster's singing, he had also killed the canary, distressing her so much that she in turn killed him. Their natural sympathy for the woman who has suffered much in a man's world overcomes their legal duty to tell the men about their discovery. By withholding evidence, they become accessories after the fact and implicitly condone Minnie Wright's revenge against her husband, whose psychological violence finally drove her to murder.

While this course paints a grim picture, the reality is that it is a violent world and that women are particularly vulnerable. On the other hand, a point I stress repeatedly is that, unlike some of the women in literature, we do not have to passively resign ourselves to being victims. Individually and collectively, women can not only cope with male violence against them but can reduce and ultimately, perhaps, stop it. Learning self-defense, adopting a self-assured posture, and achieving self-confidence are individual techniques. Public protests against pornographic magazines and films depicting violence against women and Take Back the Night rallies and marches are collective actions. So are the countless

shelters, crisis centers, and hot lines for abused, battered, and raped women.

The real value of my course is that it not only increases awareness of a variety of subtle and not so subtle forms of violence against women but that it also suggests options for dealing with that violence. Although it is a struggle to unlearn the lessons of a culture which conditions women to be passive victims and men to be aggressors, it can be done. Women's silence has at long last been broken.

VIDEOS AND FILMS AVAILABLE FROM THE FOLLOWING:

The Fear that Binds Us, New Front Films, Inc., Suite 505, 1409 Willow Street, Minneapolis, MN 55403.
Why Men Rape, Penn State University, AV Services, Special Services Building, University Park, PA 16802
Killing us Softly and Rape Culture, Cambridge Documentary Films, Inc., P.O. Box 385, Cambridge, MA 02139.
Not A Love Story, National Film Board of Canada, 1251 Avenue of the Americas, 16th Floor, New York, NY 10020.

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